



Association of Bay Area Governments

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ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

I. Introduction and Background

In keeping with the overall goals and objectives of the California Environmental Quality Act of 1970, public agencies in the State are obliged to consider the potential environmental effects of not only their project-level actions, but also their plan and policy adoptions. Similarly, consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the Department of Housing and Urban Development requires recipients of Section 701 Comprehensive Planning Assistance to prepare an assessment report whenever the assisted work program "will result in developmental plans or policies for land use, major community facilities, major utility systems, major transportation systems or the protection of natural areas...."

Because policies of a voluntary regional agency can not be implemented without subsequent action by Federal, State or local regulatory agencies, districts or multi-purpose units of government, the regional agency, by itself, is clearly unable to directly effect the environment either beneficially or adversely. ABAG, however, recognizes that a much broader legislative intent is represented by both the Federal and State statutes which will not be fulfilled merely by the preparation of a document. That intent is to ensure that environmental concerns are fully integrated into the planning and decision-making processes of all public agencies and that the public and their decision-makers alike are fully apprised of the environmental implications of a proposed action. ABAG recognizes and accepts its responsibility to support and attempt to achieve these objectives.

Because of the variety of project-level actions which may proceed from a decision on a policy or plan adoption, procedures for evaluating the potential effects of projects will obviously not be completely appropriate for the assessment of policy implications. Although both Federal and State guidelines recognize the difficulty of applying procedures designed to enable evaluation of specific projects to policies and plans, little guidance has been provided to agencies faced with the responsibility to evaluate policy or plan impacts. Similarly, although there is widespread agreement that environmental impact assessment must be conducted in a regional context, little has been done in the way of formulating a "regional" framework which can be used by comprehensive regional planning

agencies to assess the potential effects of either their own actions or those of other agencies. The dual problems of discerning policy impacts from project impacts and maintaining an areawide perspective are compounded when the regional agency must rely on the authority of other agencies to ensure that its objectives are achieved. A third, more basic, problem is shared by all agencies which have responsibilities to conduct environmental impact assessment. That is the difficulty of formulating an approach which, consistent with legislative intent, ensures that analysis of environmental effects is an integral part of the planning process and an input to policy development, rather than an after-the-fact evaluation or attempt at justification conducted after the planning work has been completed and substantive decisions have been made.

These procedures describe the process which ABAG will use, on an interim basis, to assess the environmental effects of its proposed policies and plans consistent with the requirements of the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the intent of the National Environmental Policy Act and the California Environmental Quality Act. The process outlined here has been specifically formulated to accommodate and respond to the characteristics and scope of the comprehensive regional planning process. It is not intended to deal with local planning processes or mechanisms or replicate local agency assessment procedures.

II. Interim Environmental Assessment Objectives

Recognizing that these procedures represent a unique and pioneering effort for ABAG and all other councils of government, these Environmental Assessment Procedures are intended for interim use only. There are two other important reasons why these Procedures are interim in nature. First, it is likely that the State Resources Agency's CEQA Guidelines will undergo significant changes in the near future. Hopefully, ABAG's experience could assist the State in the development of new guidelines which respond to the differences between policy and project impact assessment, as well as the distinction between direct and advisory implementation authority. The second reason is that upcoming changes in ABAG's planning program, including plan update and the preparation of new plan elements, are expected to provide both new bases for impact assessment and new procedures to which an assessment process must relate.

These Procedures have specifically been formulated to accomplish the following interim objectives:

1. To enable review of regional policies to determine their viability as criteria and standards for assessing compatibility with overall regional environmental quality objectives;
2. To respond to insufficiently defined but important responsibilities to conduct impact assessment;
3. To augment the current state of knowledge regarding methods and procedures of impact assessment;
4. To identify inadequacies in ABAG's planning program which impair its ability to conduct assessment and to facilitate the formulation of work program priorities to eliminate such inadequacies;
5. To test the applicability of the proposed assessment procedures at the regional policy level.

III. Objectives and Principles

The purpose of these procedures is to establish a process to ensure that:

1. The planning activities of the Association of Bay Area Governments are conducted in full recognition of the range of potential effects of regional policies; and
2. A basis exists for evaluating the compatibility of regional policies, and project-level actions to implement such policies, with ABAG's overall objective of fostering the physical, economic and social well-being of the region's citizens by protecting, enhancing and maintaining all aspects of the region's environment.

In support of these objectives the formulation of the assessment process described in these procedures has been guided by the following principles:

1. The term environment when used here is intended to include the total social, physical and natural environment, including geographic features and animal and plant life. Environmental impact assessment is the process of evaluating the nature, extent and severity of changes that will occur to the total environment as the direct or indirect result of a decision to undertake a particular course of action;
2. Impact assessment is a basic component of any planning process, but an even more important element of regional planning because those plans must provide criteria and standards which enable assessment of the regional implications and relationship to regional policies and objectives of project-level actions at all jurisdictional levels;
3. By improving its capability to assess the range of potential effects of its policies and programs, ABAG can increase the likelihood of achieving adopted regional objectives;
4. It is the function of a regional planning agency not to supplant local planning, but rather to provide a framework within which local multi-purpose jurisdictions and special purpose districts can carry out a range of activities compatible with the achievement of regional objectives. To this end, the regional plan is implemented at two primary levels:
 - a. At the regional level by commenting on the regional implications of local and regional plans and project-level actions; by advocating actions supportive of regional objectives by all jurisdictional levels and the private sector; and by assisting governments in carrying out activities which will facilitate achievement of regional objectives;

- b. At the local level by adopting and implementing plans which call for a range of activities supportive of and compatible with regional objectives.
5. The responsibility of the regional agency to assess the range of potential effects of the policies it proposes does not diminish or replace the responsibility of local multi-purpose jurisdictions and special districts to themselves consider both the potential local effects and the regional implications of their policies and project-level actions and to prepare assessments as required by Federal or State statutes or local ordinance or regulation.
6. Although the purpose of an assessment process is to objectively describe the potential effects of an action, the relative significance of these effects and the desirability of their adoption cannot be determined without reference to a specified set of values. The values which shall guide the decisions made by ABAG are expressed in the adopted Regional Plan 1970:1990 and subsequently adopted policies, goals and objectives.

IV. The Assessment Process

At an early and appropriate stage during the planning process, ABAG staff and policy bodies shall carry out the following activities as a basis for formulating and selecting policies and plans to be recommended for ABAG approval. The process has only general application to the diversity of issues with which a comprehensive areawide planning agency may be concerned and is not intended to limit consideration of other factors which staff or policy bodies may deem important. Moreover, the sequence described here may not always be appropriate. The process should, however, at a minimum contain the elements described below.

1. Describe and, if possible, quantify the objectives being sought by the plan or policy to be proposed.
2. Describe the setting in which the proposed plan or policy would be implemented by identifying:
 - a. Existing and salient natural, social and economic characteristics and trends of the region or sub-region in general;

- b. Existing and salient characteristics and trends of the functional area to be affected by the proposed plan or policy. The description should include an inventory of basic information, as well as an expression of the ways in which various components interact and relate to one another within the regional setting.
3. Identify alternative means of achieving the desired objectives.

Consideration should be given to alternative approaches which can be taken by the regional agency -- project review, advocacy, research on strategies for implementation -- as well as different types of actions by other jurisdictional levels and the private sector. The alternative of no policy action by ABAG should always be considered.

4. Assess the implications of each alternative:
 - a. Describe the natural, social and economic conditions likely to be altered.

Potential changes can be described in terms of their spatial or chronological relationship to a particular alternative. The assessment should therefore include both the primary or direct effects of selecting a particular approach and the secondary or even tertiary (indirect) effects. Consideration should also be given to short-term or temporary changes, long-range or permanent alterations and cumulative effects which may result in connection with related public or private actions.

- b. Identify the costs and benefits of the potential changes to different population groups within the region or sub-region.

Express the effects of potential changes as impacts on particular groups of people. Groups can be categorized by type (e.g. economic, political, social characteristics), by geographic location (e.g. North Bay, East Bay, etc.), by urban type (e.g. suburban, rural, etc.), or other characterizations which seem appropriate according to the nature of the objectives and the functional area under consideration.

- c. Identify parties with implementation responsibilities in both public and private sectors.

This listing should include jurisdictions whose policies or responsibilities, although not directly related to this functional area, could significantly affect the achievement of the stated objectives through this particular approach. In some cases a significant role could be played by a particular industry (e.g. residential developers) or interest group as well. If possible these should be included.

5. Evaluate alternatives with respect to:

- a. Compatibility with specified ABAG goals, objectives and policies.
- b. Compatibility with goals, objectives and policies of parties with identified implementation responsibilities.
- c. Potential effectiveness in achievement of specified objective(s).

6. Based on evaluation, select the most desirable alternative and more fully describe. Alternative may be altered at this point based on the findings of the evaluation and analysis.

7. For the preferred alternative, describe in greater detail:

- a. Condition changes likely to occur.

If possible, an attempt should now be made to quantify the magnitude and scope of the changes identified.

- b. Groups to be affected by the condition changes.
- c. Beneficial and adverse effects in terms of goals, objectives and policies of ABAG and other parties with implementation responsibilities. Potential conflicts should be identified.
- d. Measures which can be taken by all parties with implementation responsibilities for reducing the potential adverse effects.

- e. Undesirable effects and conflicts with the goals, objectives and policies of all implementation agencies which cannot be eliminated or reduced.

V. The Assessment Report

The purpose of an assessment report is to document the process, described above, which has been used to evaluate and select planning alternatives. Although the following description does not duplicate the one provided in the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Handbook for Section 701 Comprehensive Planning Assistance (CPM 6041.1A), all of the required elements would be covered if the assessment report were, at a minimum, to include the following:

1. A summary or abstract of the preferred plan(s) or policies.
2. A description of the anticipated direct and indirect effects, both beneficial and adverse, of carrying out the proposal, including consideration of effects on both the natural environment and on identified population groups and identification of the resources required for implementation.

An adverse effect is one which conflicts with the environmental goals of the Association of Bay Area Governments, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Comprehensive Planning Assistance Program, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the California Environmental Quality Act of 1970 including:

- a. Association of Bay Area Governments, adopted by the General Assembly, September, 1968

"To protect and enhance San Francisco Bay and the major physical features and environmental qualities of the Region."

"To provide the opportunity for all persons in the Bay Area to obtain adequate shelter convenient to other activities and facilities in neighborhoods that are satisfying to them."

"To designate ample land and facilities for the economic growth of the region in order to provide opportunities for all citizens and communities to improve their economic well-being."

"To provide a transportation system that is integrated with land use and consistent with the city-centered concept of regional development."

"To provide a permanent regional open space system that makes possible the range of activities essential to the city-centered concept of regional development."

"To create a sense of regional identity, responsibility, and cooperation among citizens, organizations, and governments in the Bay Area."

b. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Handbook for Section 701 Comprehensive Planning Assistance

"To improve and conserve the quality of the air, water and earth resources for the benefit of present and future generations in the planning and shaping of man-made environments."

To "minimize or prevent undue damage, unwise use, or unwarranted pre-empting of natural resources and opportunities."

To "recognize and make prudent allowance for major latent environmental dangers and risks (e.g. floods, mud slides, earthquakes and air and water pollution)."

To "foster the human benefits obtainable from use of the natural environment by wise use of the opportunities available...."

c. National Environmental Policy Act of 1969

To "assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings"

To "attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk to health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequence."

To "achieve a balance between population and resource use which permits high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities."

d. California Environmental Quality Act of 1970

To "develop and maintain a high-quality environment now and in the future, and take all action necessary to protect, rehabilitate, and enhance the environmental quality of the state."

To "take all action necessary to provide the people of this state with clean air and water, enjoyment of aesthetic, natural, scenic, and historic environmental qualities, and freedom from excessive noise."

To "prevent the elimination of fish or wildlife species due to man's activities, insure that fish and wildlife populations do not drop below self-perpetuating levels, and preserve for future generations representations of all plant and animal communities and examples of the major periods of California history."

To "create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony to fulfill the social and economic requirements of present and future generations."

3. Identification of measures which can be taken by public and private sectors, including ABAG, to achieve:
 - a. Reduction in or elimination of adverse effects on the natural environment and identified population groups which could result from implementation of the proposed plan(s) or policies;
 - b. Greater compatibility with the goals, objectives and policies of ABAG and other agencies identified as having implementation roles or responsibilities;
 - c. Reduction in reliance upon and utilization of limited or irreplaceable resources.
4. Identification of the alternative approaches which were considered, including a brief description of each and findings of the evaluation which led to selection of the proposed alternative.
5. Statement of reasons why the proposed plan(s) or policies are believed desirable despite adverse effects identified. Consideration should particularly be given to:
 - a. Long-range effects on natural, economic and human resources;
 - b. The possibility of precluding alternative approaches at some time in the future;
 - c. Adopted goals, objectives and policies identified as bases for decision making.

6. Listing of jurisdictions with potential implementation responsibilities with statement of applicable and related policies including regulatory authority with respect to identified potential effects.

VI. Applicability

These assessment procedures are applicable to any ABAG work program which will result in the formulation of plans or policies intended to affect the quality of the region's environment. It is recognized and intended that environmental concerns must be addressed by assessing the potential effects of proposed regional actions at an early stage and as an integral part of the planning process. An environmental assessment document, detailing the findings of the assessment process in the form prescribed in these procedures will be prepared whenever ABAG's planning work has resulted in the proposal of such plans or policies. The decision to advise other jurisdictions and interested parties of the findings of an assessment which has been conducted to determine the potential regional implications and compatibility with adopted regional policies, goals and objectives of a proposed project-level action by another agency, organization or person will not require the preparation of a separate assessment report in accordance with these procedures.

VII. Procedures for Evaluation and Review of Assessment Reports

In accordance with the requirements of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the assessment report will be appended to the proposed plan(s) or policies and shall accompany them through all deliberations leading to approval as a description of the planning process which resulted in their proposal. The assessment report will also be available to the public and to other jurisdictions before ABAG hearings on the proposed plan(s) or policies. Procedures for evaluation and review of assessment reports shall conform to ABAG procedures for plan amendment and adoption.

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